

Submitted to Southern Lakes Newspapers, April 26, 2025



In Their Own Words

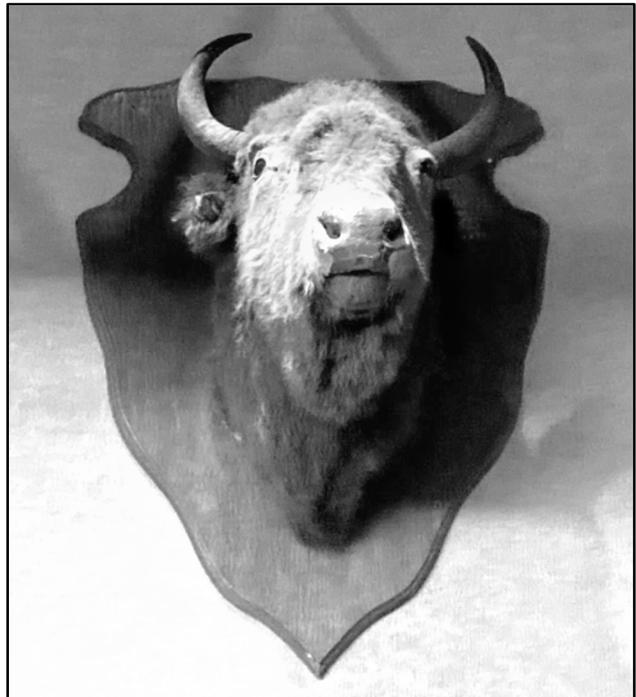
Curated by Gina Neist, Website eaglehistoricalsociety.org;

Email: curator@eaglehistoricalsociety.org

Lost Bison Herd

This article was written by Ron Kurowski, Editor of Scuppernong Journal, and published in the EHS Newsletter in October of 2007. The mounted bison head can be seen in the Natural History Museum and Nature Center at the Kettle Moraine State Forest Southern Unit Headquarters in Eagle.

Could a recent donation of an old mounted bison head and a DNA test prove that a small herd of bison still existed in the Kettle Moraine region at the time of settlement? Recently the DNR museum received a mounted bison head from John Stannisch, a descendant of pioneer Jonathan Betts. The Betts Farm is located in the Town of Eagle, a few miles south of the Forest Headquarters on Betts Road. The mounted head is from a bison that was reportedly shot by Jonathan Betts in the early days of settlement near Oconomowoc.



Jonathan Betts came to America from Norfolk, England in 1830 and spent 4 years in Rome, New York. In 1838 he moved to Eagle and formed a partnership with F. Draper and farmed part of the Eagle Prairie. They were some of the first settlers in the area. Mr. Betts operated a 6-yoke oxen sod-breaking plow for several years and became well known throughout the area, having plowed thousands of acres of virgin prairie sod. I found his occupation to be very interesting as it helps support his story of seeing buffalo. If he was plowing that many acres of prairie, he would have spent considerable time in the buffalo's main habitat, greatly increasing his chances of finding them. It also would have explained why he said he killed one in the Oconomowoc area, as he was probably working in the area.

The remarkable story of Jonathan Bett's mounted buffalo head has once again brought attention to the fact that buffalo, perhaps even a small herd, might have existed in the Kettle

Moraine as late as 1842. John Stannisch's first recollection of the buffalo head was in the late 1950's when he worked on the Bett's farm, then owned by his Uncle Robert and Aunt Lillian Betts Stannisch. His uncle was an avid hunter and had one room devoted to hunting equipment which is where he first saw "Ol' Buff," as the family members referred to the mounted buffalo head. In 1960, his uncle and aunt sold the farm and gave the mounted head to John's dad. Eventually, his dad gave Ol' Buff to John in 1970 and he has had it right up until he moved out of the area and donated it to a museum.

Experts were called to examine the DNA and try to determine the age of the buffalo head. Even if the DNA test fails to provide us with proof, I still believe that a small herd of buffalo still existed at settlement time. The thing that makes this believable for me is having another pioneer family say they also observed buffalo and killed one.